The Battle of the Sexes

The Evolution of Human Sexuality. DONALD SYMONS. Oxford University Press, New York, 1979. x, 358 pp. $15.95.

. . . many times biology not only fails to increase our understanding of human beings but seems to have the magical power to make us forget what we already know.—The Evolution of Human Sexuality, *p. 128.*

The Evolution of Human Sexuality is a sociobiological investigation into human sexual propensities that is as much in the spirit of James Thurber as of E. O. Wilson. At its center is the battle of the sexes, a subject that has been richly elaborated in folklore around the world, explained by Symons as a conflict between the differing optimal reproductive strategies of males and females. Whereas men can maximize their genetic contribution to the succeeding generation by impregnating as many females as possible, women's reproductive potential is relatively inelastic in terms of number of offspring. Men should therefore be expected to go for quantity, whereas women's interests are best served through quality control.

Symons argues that, as a result of these differing reproductive interests, men and women have different "human natures" as far as sexuality is concerned. The crux of the matter is that men have an innate propensity to seek a variety of sexual partners. A woman, on the other hand, may benefit from desiring intercourse with a man other than the one to whom she happens to be married should the other man be more "fit" than her husband, but a desire for variety beyond that would be not merely reproductively irrelevant but maladaptive if it led her to blow a significant portion of her reproductive capital on some not-so-fit male or to become distracted from protecting the important little investments she has already produced. Another difference is that sexual jealousy is more constant, powerful, and motivated in males than in females, given the reproductive stakes.

In theoretical terms, the connection between optimal reproductive strategies and innate sexual propensities is not a necessary one. Symons, like other sociobiologists, insists upon the distinction between ultimate causes (maximization of reproductive success) and proximate mechanisms (which may involve varying degrees of innateness and learning). However, from a general biological perspective stability would seem to be associated with some significant component of innateness. In this particular case, Symons maintains that emotions, including sexual ones, are "close to the genes." I should emphasize here that Symons is concerned less with overt sexual behavior than with the interior side of sexuality—sexual feelings. Indeed, one of his central points is that various institutions of human life, notably marriage, which has its own set of purposes, present an obstacle to the expression of our real sexual natures. His argument is that it is adaptive to have desires that will keep one struggling to escape from the limitations of a "marital environment" that cramps one's reproductive style.

Marriage, then, is a union of opposites not merely in terms of sex itself but in terms of sexual goals and inclinations as well. Symons argues that differences between male and female sexuality are generally obscured by the sexes' need to compromise with one another, and therefore proposes, in what is surely one of the most ingenious arguments in the literature on sexuality, that the innate sexual tendencies of men and women are most truly expressed in the behavior of homosexuals. Here we have a true sociobiological paradox: behavior that is to be understood as molded by selection to maximize reproductive success is most characteristic of those who are not involved in reproduction at all—unless, of course, they are also willing to engage in the distortion of human sexual propensities that heterosexual relationships entail.

A major problem with Symons's underlying thesis is that it is not only unproven but unprovable. The very care and clarity with which he outlines the relevant theoretical and methodological issues show the difficulties to be more insurmountable than he himself seems to realize. Drawing a scrupulous analytic distinction between what can be considered as true evolutionary "functions" and what are mere "effects," he does not follow through by applying the distinction to any evidence bearing upon the question. Indeed, there is the problem of what would constitute evidence in the first place. Certain forms of sexuality, Symons says, were selected for over a long period when human beings lived in a stable "natural" environment. That time, however, is now past; humans live, for the most part, in what Symons calls "unnatural" environments where a large part of their sexual behavior can be viewed as "random noise." But it is from just these unnatural places that Symons garners most of his randomly assembled data. Like the 19th-century cultural evolutionists, Symons has recourse to the notion of "survivals," that is, behaviors that make no sense in their current settings and must therefore be explained with reference to some earlier state of human affairs. The one example he gives, however (which has to do not with sex but with sugar consumption), can, like those adduced by his predecessors, be accounted for in its present context once it is better understood. Thus, Symons is not, as he claims, offering a falsifiable hypothesis, but is rather arguing a position that has to be accepted on aprioristic grounds: it makes sense if you agree with the basic principles of sociobiology.

For those of us who feel that any satisfactory perception of the relationship between the sexes must contain elements of contradiction and irony, Symons's approach does present a refreshing alternative to the pieties of sexologists, ethologists, and others who assume an intrinsic complementarity between male and female or assert that human sexuality functions to guarantee the stability of the pair bond. Yet the notion that reproductive strategies provide "the" key to such contradictions and ironies is an invitation to an intellectually impoverished view of the human condition. In brief, Symons ties sexuality too closely to reproduction. When he says his approach is "catholic" (and, indeed, he does range far and wide, high and low, in his search for data), he is right in more than one sense. And I do not think he will succeed where the Church has failed.

Symons shows no awareness of the many meanings that sex can take on in different cultural settings. He appears not to understand the various social purposes it can serve. Symons is quite wrong when he speaks of the politicization of sex as something that has occurred over the past decade and sees it mainly in terms of why liberals or feminists might hold certain views of sexuality and oppose others, including the

one he himself represents. The real "sexual politics"—pace Kate Millett—is the way the regulation of sexual activity, sexual access, and marital arrangements serve to put people in their political and economic places. Had Symons recognized this, he might not, for example, have tried to show that rape has more to do with a desire for sex than with a desire for power but would instead have addressed himself to how and why the two are intertwined. For a case close to home, I recommend Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. For a case away from home, there are ethnographies of South American Indian groups among whom the institution of gang rape has been reported. Among the Mundurucú of Brazil, gang rape has been seen both by the ethnographers and by the Mundurucú themselves as a way of keeping the women in line. One way Mundurucú women get out of line is by being sexually forward and promiscuous. One can see how Symons would account for a husband's interest in having such behavior punished (though not why he should agree to this particular form of redress) and for a nonhusband's interest in punishing someone else's wife in such a way, but all this means is that someone's interest is bound to be served by whatever sex happens to be going on. The Mundurucu case also reminds us that if a woman does not actively seek sex with a variety of partners some mechanism other than an innate lack of desire may be at work.

If Symons has failed to see sex as what we might call, in the words of the French ethnologist Marcel Mauss, a "total social fact," the fault is not entirely his. Social scientists themselves have failed to accord it the significance it deserves in their empirical research and theory building. (The same point might be made with respect to the paucity and uneven quality of the cross-cultural data on erotic activity and attitudes presented in Symons's book. Symons has industriously sought out good material on this subject, but there just wasn't that much of it to find. True, this may not be the easiest subject to study, but that is not the whole story.)

What is Symons's fault is his attempt to avoid seeing *anything* as a social fact. Observing, quite correctly, that concepts like "society" and "culture" have commonly been reified in social scientific writings, Symons has apparently decided that they are more trouble than they are worth. He does not seriously entertain the idea that they may be necessary analytic tools for understanding human action. On the contrary, whereas Durkheim told us that a belief in God is really a belief in society, Symons in effect tells us that a belief in Durkheim is really a belief in God. After all, who ever "saw" a "society"?

Consider the argument in which Symons claims that the sexual double standard is not determined by "culture" but by "the cumulative history of individuals attempting to influence one another through language" (p. 230). It is hard to imagine what Symons's understanding of "language" is, and this reader would just as soon not try to find out. The point is that the only perspective Symons seems able to take toward human action is that of individual interest. Since one cannot derive the culturally patterned social arrangements within which human beings define and pursue their purposes from some prior principle of individual interest, reproductive or otherwise, Symons, understandably enough, cannot accommodate any concept like "society" or "culture" in his view of the human scene. His work is thus not likely to commend itself to social scientists unless they decide to pack it all in and return to utilitarianism.

Lest I be suspected of a dogmatic opposition to viewing human behavior in biological perspective or looking for universals, let me emphasize that the real issue is how much we learn about what. In this light, I would submit that, if there is in fact a basic and recurrent "men's problem," Symons may have gotten it backwards. Instead of seeing the quintessential male odyssey as an attempt to spread one's seed as far and as wide as possible, we might see it as the quest for paternity, for parlaying what may be a minimal physical investment into a maximal social asset. We may then question Symons's sociobiological transmogrification of the old husbands' tale that marriage is essentially a women's institution that men have to be tricked into somehow. On the contrary, marriage can be seen less as the way women get sexual partners to help take care of the kids—after all, others can do that—than as the way for men to be not merely genitors but fathers.

This approach goes a lot farther than Symons's in accounting for such widespread human institutions as bride-wealth, bride service, and male rituals in which men "give birth" to the next generation of males—rituals that seem at once to assert the primacy of social reproduction over natural reproduction and yet reveal an attempt to mimic, to capture, the female role. In fact, one can view sociobiology itself from this angle, as a symbolic appropriation of what, on the surface, appears to be women's dominant role in reproduction. For the sociobiologist (who is, as it happens, usually male), women are reproductively dependable, but boring. The real action is with the men. Some of them may be total losers, but they are the only ones who can be big winners. I hasten to add that inquiring into the possible ideological significance of sociobiological theories does not in and of itself address the question of their correctness; that must be done on other grounds. However, it is a perfectly legitimate enterprise, since social scientists are as justified in interpreting human behavior, including that of natural scientists, from the vantage points of their own disciplines as biologists are in attempting to analyze human behavior in biological terms.

Despite all the problems with Symons's book, it nonetheless contains much of interest. He presents a lucid outline of major concepts in sociobiology and also offers some useful criticisms of the way in which such terms as "altruism" and "selfishness" have been transferred from ordinary language to scientific discourse. His chapter on the female orgasm is particularly worthy of attention. His thesis that the female orgasm is not "adaptive" in the strict evolutionary sense may be open to debate, but he presents a cogent and persuasive argument. Some of the opposition to it will come from those who have a need to sanctify their pleasures by recourse to "science" or "nature"—but that is their problem. I should think that all students of human sexuality, whatever their theoretical persuasions, would want to read this book, since, in science as in sex, one can find something intriguing and provocative without necessarily considering it to be right.

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Oceanic Peoples

The Prehistory of Polynesia. JESSE D. JENNINGS, Ed. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1979. viii, 400 pp., illus. $35.

The editor of this attractive collection of original essays tells us it was assembled at the behest of Harvard University Press to fill the need for an "organized presentation of findings" on the origins and prehistory of the Polynesian-speaking peoples of the South Seas. "I invited the individuals whose chapters follow to join me in the preparation of a book that